DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 488 CE 062 426

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TITLE	Career Education and Applied Academics. ERIC Digest No. 128.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CE-92-128
PUB DATE	92
CONTRACT	RI88062005
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Education; Apprenticeships; Basic Skills; Career Development; *Career Education; Career Guidance; *Education Work Relationship; Employment Potential; Futures (of Society); *Integrated Curriculum; Job Skills; Labor Force Development; Occupational Information; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education; Technology; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

In many respects, career education has never been needed more than it is today. The need to keep abreast of technological change and to participate effectively in today's high-performance workplace requires each worker to possess a set of basic competencies and a foundation of skills and personal qualities. The competencies, foundation skills, and qualities identified by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills encompass two key tenets of career education--infusion and careers emphasis. These two principles are critical in developing the work force. Although not specifically termed infusion, the following career programs incorporate the concepts of integration of academic and vocational education and can make vital contributions in preparing workers for the changing workplace: career information and guidance systems, youth apprenticeship, youth community service, career-oriented secondary school programs and curricula, and tech prep. The benefits of career education can probably best be maximized by working with educators in other disciplines. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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ED350488

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DIGEST
NO. 128

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Career Education and Applied Academics

by Michael E. Wonacott

1992

EDO-CE-92-128

Career education is a concept that originated in the early 1970s. As explained by one of the field's original theorists, the premise of career education was that schools should "use the entire educational experience to better prepare youth for career success in the full range of occupations while using the potential relevance of academic learning as a motivator for educational success" (Mangum 1992, pp. 31-32). Career education is intended to prepare each individual for career development–that is, to select and engage in productive, satisfying work throughout life.

Perhaps the most essential element of career education is the close link it espouses between education and work. In its broadest sense, career development seeks to answer fundamental questions about education and work for each individual (Terry and Hargis forthcoming): "What do I do with my life? How much education do I need? What satisfactions do I want from my work? What skills can I develop? What level of income do I hope to have? How do I change careers?" The goal of career education is to provide the individual with the knowledge and skills needed to answer those questions.

Thus, it could be said that career education is but one more chapter in the historical debate over the merits of a liberal education versus a technical education. Herr (1987) traces this debate back to the nation's founders, contrasting Franklin's preference for a pragmatic, utilitarian education with Jefferson's belief that possession of basic academic skills equipped one to move into almost any realm. It could also be said that career education espouses an approach midway between a liberal and a technical education: Although the value of theoretical knowledge for its own sake cannot be denied, and although specific occupational knowledge and skills are certainly needed, no less necessary are the basic academic skills, an understanding of their relevance to the workplace, and specific knowledge about the world of work and individual careers.

Is Career Education Still Relevant Today?

In many respects, career education has never been needed more than it is today. The ever-faster pace of technological change and the increased competitiveness of workplaces and economies around the globe have challenged the nation's ability to maintain the world's highest standard of living. According to the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS 1991), a strong back, eager hands, and a high school diploma used to be enough to get a job, keep it, and make it into a career. No more–now the need to keep abreast of technological change and to participate effectively in today's high-performance workplace require each worker to possess a set of basic competencies and a foundation of skills and personal qualities (ibid., p. vii):

Basic competency areas–

- **Resources**–allocating time, money, materials, space, and staff
- **Interpersonal skills**–working on teams, teaching others, serving customers, leading, negotiating, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds
- **Information**–acquiring and evaluating data, organizing and maintaining files, interpreting and communicating, and using computers to process information
- **Systems**–understanding social, organizational, and technological systems; monitoring and correcting performance; and designing or improving systems
- **Technology**–selecting equipment and tools, applying technology to specific tasks, and maintaining and troubleshooting technologies

Foundation skills and qualities–

- **Basic skills**–reading, writing, mathematics, speaking, and listening
- **Thinking skills**–thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, knowing how to learn, and reasoning
- **Personal qualities**–responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity

A further SCANS report (1992) spells out the implications for educators who wish to provide their students with such competencies and foundation skills: (1) teaching should be offered in context–"learning to know" should not be separated from "learning to do;" (2) improving the match between what work requires and what students are taught requires changing how instruction is delivered and how students learn; (3) high performance requires a new system of school administration and assessment; and (4) the entire community must be involved.

Explicitly or implicitly, the SCANS competencies, foundation, and implications encompass two key tenets of career education:

- **Infusion**–Prerequisite knowledge and skills needed in the world of work should not be taught in isolation; rather, they should be infused throughout the curriculum. Career information, career decision-making skills, academic basic skills, technological skills, information skills, and interpersonal skills should pervade all of education.
- **Careers emphasis**–Students must be able to see the direct relevance of instruction to their own future in the world of work. Such visible relevance helps increase both motivation and learning (Terry and Hargis forthcoming).

What Are Effective Career Education Techniques?

The principles of infusion and career emphasis are critical in developing the work force. Although not specifically termed infusion, the following career programs incorporate the concepts of integration of academic and vocational education and can make vital contributions in preparing workers for the changing workplace.

Career information and guidance systems. Information on careers and counseling in making a suitable career choice are critical components of the transition from education to employment. A survey by the Council of Chief State School Officers (1991) reports a variety of career information and guidance systems across the nation that focus on these objectives:

- Helping students evaluate their abilities and interests
- Providing guidance on education requirements for occupations of interest (including nontraditional careers)
- Providing students with up-to-date labor market information
- Using guidance, academic, and vocational education personnel for counseling

- Informing parents about course requirements for employment or postsecondary training
- Providing job placement assistance

State systems such as the Oregon Career Information System are typically designed to meet the National Career Development Guidelines of the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (Oregon Occupational Information Coordinating Committee 1989).

Youth apprenticeship. An increasing number of youth apprenticeship programs enable secondary students to enter apprenticeships conducted jointly by local schools and businesses (William T. Grant Foundation 1991). Students enrolled in youth apprenticeship programs typically receive on-the-job training at the workplace and related theoretical instruction in the school classroom. Such programs enjoy all the advantages of work-based approaches to education: a hands-on approach, instruction based on real work tasks, and mentoring and instruction by skilled practitioners.

Youth community service. A national movement is also underway to provide youth with opportunities for community service. Such community service programs are believed to provide youth with an enhanced sense of self-worth and good citizenship and to increase the relevance of learning (William T. Grant Foundation 1991). Over 3,000 community service programs are operated in public and private schools across the United States; more than 450 college campuses have programs to encourage community service; and 55 year-round service or conservation corps and 20 summer youth corps enroll about 20,000 youth.

Career-oriented secondary school programs and curricula. Mitchell et al. (1990) identified a number of urban high schools that have great success in preparing at-risk students for specific occupational fields as well as for college entrance. Factors common across all the programs include a safe and orderly environment, a businesslike attitude among students and teachers, high expectations of all students, and strong linkages with business and industry, among others. Such programs can serve as models for other educators serving at-risk students.

Similar success has been achieved by other efforts to develop integrated, career-oriented curricula for both vocational and academic subjects. One example is the Educational Excellence through Career-Vocational Education project (Leising et al. 1989), which provided technical assistance, guidance, and inservice programs to reshape school philosophies, develop comprehensive guidance plans, and review curriculum in all areas. Among the outcomes of the project were these: dropout rates decreased from 16 to 11 percent; attendance rates increased by 1.8 percent; teen pregnancies dropped by 50 percent; and suspension days decreased by 84 percent.

Tech prep. Another new approach to education is the tech prep concept–a continuum of articulated course offerings spanning the last 2 years of high school and the first 2 years of college (William T. Grant Foundation 1991, pp. 25-28). Tech prep programs typically include a strong career counseling component, genuine school-college collaboration and articulation, applied academics in basic subjects, and extensive involvement of local employers. Many states are setting up requirements for tech-prep programs, following the lead of the federal Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990.

How Can the Benefits of Career Education Be Maximized?

The benefits of career education can probably best be maximized by working with educators in other disciplines. Not all educators are aware of the advantages of career education for their students–and for themselves. Academic educators need to understand, for example, that career education is not a threat to their disciplines; rather, it is a powerful tool that they can use to gain the interest of students. They need to understand that teaching academic skills in a careers context makes *their* curriculum more relevant to their students, increasing both motivation and learning. After all, geometry can be dry when applied to conceptual triangles, but it is less so when applied to actual triangles in the real world–like those found in bridges, buildings, football formations, roof trusses, freeway ramps, engine brackets, beveled edges, and street grids.

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Developed with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. RI88062005. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of OERI or the Department. *Digests* may be freely reproduced.

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